

Animals, vegetables help fight rising prices

E. KENTUCKIANS RAISE GARDENS, CHICKENS, COWS

By Cassandra Kirby
CKIRBY@HERALD-LEADER.COM

WEST LIBERTY -- Nella Pack's country home sits off a two-lane road that winds through the rolling hills and wide valleys of Morgan County in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.

It's here, where the sun beams down through full apple trees, that Pack spends a few hours each summer day tending to a small garden filled with tomatoes, peppers, corn, watermelons and such.



"I've had a garden for years," she says. "But the cow and the chickens are new."

In the face of rising food and fuel costs, Pack joins a growing number of people in Eastern Kentucky who are raising gardens and farm animals in a scramble to help make ends meet, according to extension service officials from several counties.

Although it was commonplace for families to raise their own food 50 years ago in the mountains, experts say small gardens and chicken flocks have faded away as the price of food got cheaper.

But the economy is sluggish and families are finding themselves paying much more for basic items such as milk, eggs and meat.

Last year, the consumer price index for food rose 5 percent, the highest gain in nearly two decades. In addition, gas prices have jumped from \$3.14 a gallon a year ago to an average of \$3.98 Wednesday, according to AAA's daily fuel gauge report.

And there's no relief in sight, according to a report released May 29 by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization.

For the next 10 years, food prices will remain well above the levels of the last decade, the report says, citing high oil prices, changing diets, economic growth and expanding populations as underlying factors behind the rise.

The report also blames a growing demand for biofuel as another factor forcing up prices, saying that world ethanol production has tripled between 2000 and 2007 and is expected to double again during the next decade.

Rising prices have especially hurt Eastern Kentucky, an area with stubbornly deep pockets of poverty, where many families must carefully plan how each dollar is spent.

"You almost can't afford to drive to the grocery store," said Pack, adding that for some in the mountains it can take 20 minutes or longer to reach the nearest store. "By the time you buy the gas, there's nothing left to buy the groceries."

As prices climb, county extension offices, which offer agricultural resources to the public, say they have been overwhelmed by mountain folks seeking information about the best and safest way to raise gardens, chickens and cows as they look for ways to save.

Several agricultural and farming experts from the region gathered in Morgan County last week to hold educational sessions about growing vegetables and farm animals. They called the event Back to the Farm Day.

"We are a rural community, but it doesn't mean we are still a farming community," said Sarah Fannin-Holliday, an extension agent from the Morgan Cooperative Extension Service. "A lot of this, our grandparents or our great-grandparents did daily, but the know-how has been lost and we are trying to bring it back."

Pack, 53, was among dozens who drove to the fairgrounds in Morgan County, which, according to the 2000 U.S. census, has a population of less than 15,000, with 31 percent of residents living in poverty and more than 8 percent unemployed.

"We're just trying to be prepared," said Pack, who along with her husband, Jesse, has taught their five children and eight grandchildren how to raise a garden. "Times are hard and I believe it's going to get worse."

As more seek to grow their own food, stores have reported sharp increases in the sales of vegetable seeds, tomato transplants and fruit trees.

W. Atlee Burpee & Co., the nation's largest seed company, has sold twice as many seeds this year as it did last year, with half the increase from new customers, the company's president, George Ball, said in a statement. The company says a dime spent on seeds yields about \$1 worth of produce.

In Morgan County, members of a Mennonite family who own a small country store say they can't keep vegetable plants in stock. In the past, shoppers have driven down the gravel road off Ky. 172 to visit Crockett Greenhouse for the homemade bread and deserts baked from scratch. The high demand for vegetable plants is new, the family members say.

"We keep selling out of the plants," said Linda Klippenstein, one of the daughters who works at the store. "It's because of the high food prices, you know."

But the learning curve for home gardeners can be steep and getting in too big too quickly can mean trouble, experts say.

Gardeners have to fight with bugs and fungi and work on keeping birds and squirrels away. Although some vegetables, such as salad greens, are nearly effortless to grow, others, such as celery, present a challenge.

New gardeners often don't realize what it takes for a plant to survive, said Dick Durham,